

A Strategy to Counter ISIL as a Transregional Threat

Lynn E. Davis, Jeffrey Martini, Kim Cragin

Any strategy to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) must begin with a clear-eyed assessment of the challenge at hand. ISIL's recent loss of territory represents progress in addressing that challenge, but does not change the fact that the United States and its allies confront a long-term global violent jihadist threat that preceded ISIL and will outlive ISIL.

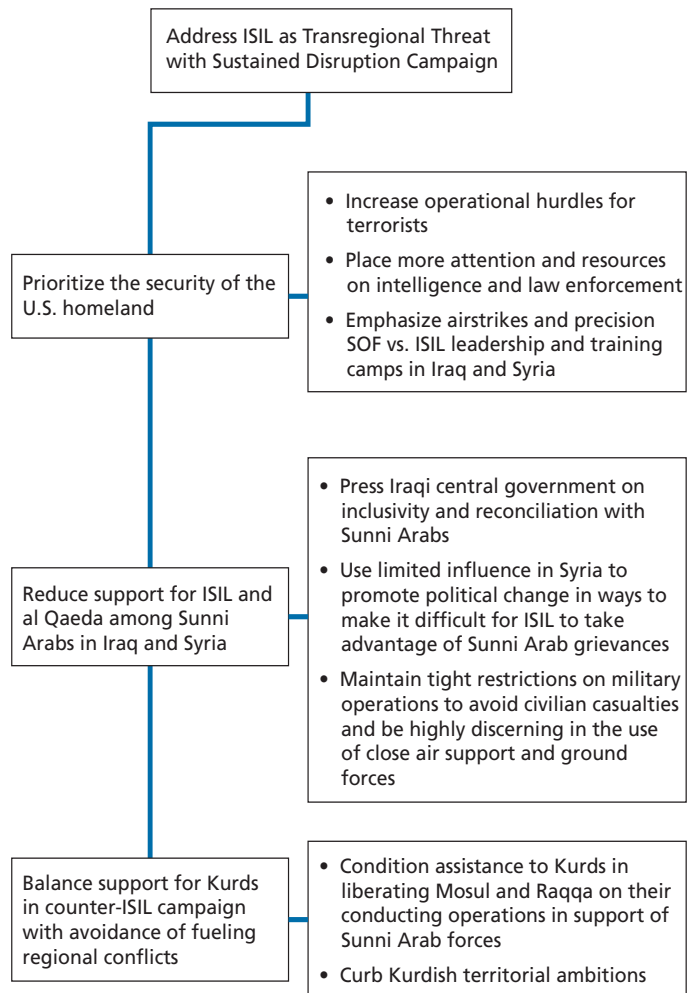
Our recommended strategy focuses on addressing ISIL as a transregional threat. The nature of the threat suggests the need to prioritize the security of Americans in the homeland, but does not imply placing the United States on a continuous war footing. Rather, U.S. government actions overseas should focus on disrupting the transregional network supporting ISIL. Practically speaking, this means increasing the operational hurdles for terrorists both inside and outside the United States, giving more attention and resources to intelligence and law enforcement, and emphasizing

air strikes and Special Operations Forces (SOF) raids on ISIL leadership and training camps in Iraq and Syria. Figure 1 presents an overview of our proposed counter-ISIL strategy.

ISIL poses a serious security threat, exploiting unrest to destabilize both Iraq and Syria and its far-flung "provinces" and taking advantage of its proto-state to engage in an effective worldwide social media campaign. ISIL's appeal is relatively narrow but born out of grievances that show no sign of being remedied.

Weak states, poor governance, a lack of security, and—in some situations—sectarianism abetted by the Iranian-Saudi rivalry sustain ISIL and other violent jihadi groups. The U.S. counter-ISIL strategy overseas should be designed to improve these conditions to the extent possible, but strategists must recognize that the United States has limited leverage to affect these conditions, and improvements will require years to accomplish. Since ISIL operates in the Middle East, North Africa, South and Central Asia, and West

Figure 1. Overview of Proposed Counter-ISIL Strategy



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Africa, any strategy cannot ignore bolstering stability in those areas. However, the United States will find that it is impossible to restore regional stability just by removing the ISIL threat.

To avoid fueling regional conflicts and to reduce support for jihadi groups, the United States should be cautious in its support of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and peshmerga in its counter-ISIL military campaign. Relying heavily on the Kurds in both Iraq and Syria to defeat ISIL's physical caliphate risks undermining U.S. interests in gaining Sunni Arab support for the military campaign, as the Kurds use this opportunity to expand their territory. Kurdish ambitions also risk serious conflict between the Kurds and Turkey in Syria and between the Kurds and the Shia-led ruling coalition in Iraq.

The military campaign will continue to be a critical part of the U.S. counter-ISIL strategy, but military forces can only play a narrow role in achieving certain U.S. objectives. The military plays an essential role in eroding ISIL's physical territory; however, U.S. military involvement generates little leverage in affecting political change unless it is coupled with strong conditions under which U.S. assistance is provided. In this case, military effectiveness is also limited by the specific nature of the threat—ISIL exists as a transregional network, in which military targets are scarce. Intelligence, law enforcement, and border security are more important in fighting ISIL as a transregional network. Military operations also can be counterproductive to the long-term goal of reducing ISIL support if they result in large numbers of refugees or civilian casualties.

Consistent with this view of the role of military forces, we support continuation of U.S. military activities, including air strikes and the training and equipping of partner forces, while

maintaining the constraint on U.S. forces operating in an “accompany” mission that could put U.S. forces in harm’s way and implicate them in the activities of local ground forces. Our proposed strategy calls for holding U.S. deployments at current levels (5,200 in Iraq and about 500 in Syria), and it does not change the mix of forces (SOF and noncombat).

Based on our assessment of the ISIL threat, we take exception to the Obama administration’s tendency to measure success primarily in terms of reducing ISIL-held territory.¹ That metric is an attractive one because it provides a positive, easily comprehended message. What it obscures, however, is that ISIL will continue to be a regional menace even if it is reduced from a proto-state to a guerrilla movement, because a change in territorial control would not change the underlying conditions that feed Sunni Arab grievances. Even if ISIL is destroyed, as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was presumed to have been destroyed nearly a decade ago, the Middle East will spawn a new standard bearer for global jihad.

Finally, given the prospect of a long-term jihadi threat and the limits of U.S. influence and leverage, political leaders need to be realistic in their strategic goals and responsible with the U.S. public in setting expectations and presenting the risks that lie ahead.

Our recommended counter-ISIL strategy has similarities and differences with that of the Obama administration. See Table 1 for a comparison between our recommended strategy and current U.S. strategy as of January 20, 2017.

In the presentation that follows, we begin with a description of the ISIL threat and then outline the overarching principles of our recommended strategy: reducing support for violent jihadist groups and increasing the difficulty for terrorists to execute attacks. In addressing the ISIL threat as a transregional network, we turn

to the major ISIL hubs (Iraq and Syria) and offer recommendations for political and military policies in these countries. Next, we describe steps to counter ISIL’s threat to the U.S. homeland, involving actions both inside the United States and abroad. One aspect of the ISIL threat—its expansion into other countries or ISIL provinces—is not included in our strategy, for reasons of space and the need for very tailored policies in each of the ISIL provinces (given the very different situations on the ground). The report concludes with our overall recommendations for a counter-ISIL strategy.

ISIL Threat: Capabilities and Intentions

ISIL gained widespread attention when it launched an offensive in June 2014, overrunning Mosul and pressing south to the outskirts of Baghdad. Although the offensive and subsequent declaration of a caliphate amounted to ISIL’s “coming-out party,” the organization has existed in other forms dating back to at least the mid-2000s. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, an ISIL precursor organization emerged in the form of AQI, which later declared itself Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). The 2011 uprising in Syria provided ISI an opportunity to expand control over the jihadist movement in both countries.² Although ISIL has not succeeded in its aspiration to unite the broader jihadi movement, it competes with al Qaeda to lead this movement and has clearly been the ascendant brand since 2014.

Eradicating the global violent jihadist threat, including ISIL, is not possible as long as the underlying conditions that feed Sunni Arab grievances continue.

Table 1. Comparison of Current U.S. Strategy with Recommended Strategy

Current U.S. Strategy	Our Recommended Strategy
The counter-ISIL campaign is structured along nine lines of effort that assign different agencies a lead or supporting role in different aspects of the campaign.	<p>While lines of effort are a useful mechanism for running an interagency campaign and deconflicting overlaps in responsibilities, they are no substitute for articulating a strategy that sets clear priorities for policies and allocating resources.</p> <p>Our strategy calls for prioritizing homeland security with more government coordination across domestic and national security operations and allocates more resources to the goal of disrupting the transregional transit hubs used by terrorists to move people, money, and weapons.</p>
While noting the need for diminishing the long-term jihadi threat, specific steps to promote Sunni-Shia reconciliation within Iraq or reduce Sunni Arab grievances in Syria have been set aside as the military campaign proceeds.	<p>Our strategy elevates these political goals and reforms; different types of military assistance will be conditional on reducing support for ISIL and al Qaeda among Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria.</p> <p>Our strategy calls for the United States to reduce its assistance to actors blocking these goals, even if it means sacrificing speed in achieving the military goals of the mission.</p>
<p>The Obama administration has placed few conditions on Kurdish military operations in Iraq or Syria despite the peshmerga and YPG’s territorial ambitions and treatment of Arab populations, which increases the risks that their actions will fuel broader regional conflicts.</p> <p>The administration has measured success primarily in terms of reducing ISIL territory.</p>	<p>Our strategy would place stronger conditions on Kurdish participation in the military campaign against ISIL—specifically, that the United States gain an agreement that the Kurdish groups will not use the campaign to expand their control.</p> <p>Our strategy gives prominence to the long-term threat of violent jihadism and would measure success using additional metrics that the communities from which ISIL recruits have identified as priorities to them, such as inclusive governance and access to justice.</p>

ISIL’s shocking brutality can hamper sober evaluation of the group. Like any adversary, the threat posed by ISIL is best understood as a function of its capabilities and intentions. An assessment of ISIL’s capabilities depends on the point of comparison; the group possesses weak capabilities relative to serious state adversaries, but

it has advanced capabilities relative to other terrorist and insurgent groups.³

ISIL fields an estimated 18,000–22,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Some of these fighters lack formal military training. Others, such as ISIL’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, have served in

the armed forces, and some are battle hardened from years of “on-the-job training.”⁴ In addition to men under arms, ISIL controls an estimated 75,000 square kilometers of territory in the Euphrates River Valley (although that number is dropping by the day), as well as scattered territory in North and West Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Central Asia.⁵ ISIL derives financial resources from oil revenue, taxation of commerce in the territory it controls, and trade in contraband, among other sources.⁶

These resources, while modest in state terms, are marshaled by ISIL in support of an ambitious project. ISIL’s immediate goal is to expand its self-declared caliphate and attrite the far enemy through external operations as well as by inspiring lone-wolf attacks.⁷ All the while, ISIL is preparing for the end times, which it believes will be ushered in by a final apocalyptic battle in northern Syria. In attempting to overthrow the state order that is the basis of the current international system, ISIL can be considered one of the more revisionist groups operating today. However, a comparison of ISIL’s capabilities and intentions reveals a shortfall with no credible path for ISIL to bring the two into balance. The group does pose a serious security threat, but that threat is more modest than its outsized ambition.

The Ideological Dimension

The ideological dimension of the ISIL threat encompasses the group’s *critique* and *prescription* of the current order. Between the two, the critique is more threatening in that it tracks with widely held beliefs among the populations that ISIL targets for recruitment. Similar to its violent jihadi predecessors, ISIL’s essential critique is that states are a Western construct that divide the *umma* (Muslim community) and elevate the judgment of men over the edicts of God.⁸ ISIL points to the oppression of Muslims by foreign

powers and local leaders, the degradation of Islamic values within society, and infighting within the Muslim community as evidence of the deleterious effects of this arrangement.⁹ What makes ISIL dangerous is that this critique appeals to many, including Sunni Muslims, and by speaking to Sunni Muslims, ISIL is addressing the overwhelming majority of the Muslim world.¹⁰

The appeal of ISIL’s critique, which is similar to critiques by other violent jihadi organizations it has superseded (including al Qaeda), suggests two important implications for the counter-ISIL campaign. The first is that the threat posed by the jihadi movement is a long-term challenge that will exist so long as underlying conditions—insecurity, poor governance, sectarianism abetted by Iranian-Saudi rivalry, etc.—continue to provide fertile ground. The second implication is that ISIL, defined as a group that possesses a leadership structure and a self-proclaimed caliphate, is only the latest standard bearer of a broader violent jihadi movement that will continue to exist after ISIL is degraded.

Although ISIL’s critique may be appealing, its actual prescription and approach to achieving its goals alienate those it seeks to win over. The group enjoys a small and committed following of true believers, but large majorities of local populations hold unfavorable views of ISIL. For example, in Lebanon, 95 percent of Sunnis have an unfavorable view of ISIL.¹¹

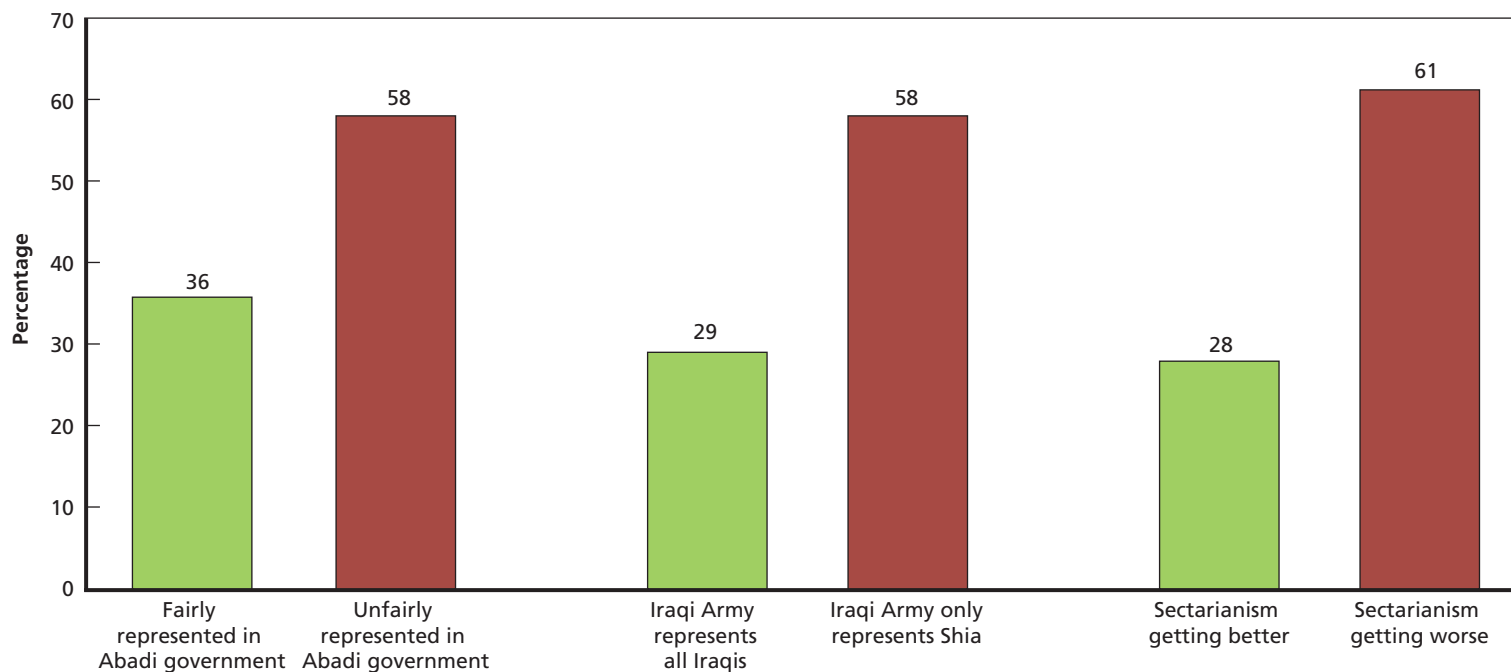
The limited appeal of ISIL’s approach is further degraded by ISIL practices that create a backlash against it. ISIL’s challenging of ingrained social structures—such as tribal hierarchies; its punishment of behaviors like smoking; and its heavy-handed tactics, including forced marriages and the imposition of protection rackets—can wear out its support in the communities where it embeds itself. Since these practices appear to have played a major role in the marginaliza-

tion of predecessor organization AQI, some believe ISIL has learned this lesson.¹² But evidence suggests many of those same practices are still in effect and may be exacerbated by the counter-ISIL military campaign, which has led ISIL into self-destructive behaviors, such as increasing local taxation to make up for loss of revenue and purging perceived informants to rationalize battlefield losses.

ISIL has shown itself capable of exploiting unrest to further destabilize Iraq, Syria, and its farther-flung “provinces.” In Iraq and Syria, ISIL plays on Sunni Arab grievances that arose largely

because of insecurity and poor governance (see Figure 2 for Sunni Iraqis’ views of governance).¹³ Sunni disenfranchisement, exemplified by Alawi rule in Syria and Shia majoritarianism in Iraq, angers the Sunni Arab communities ISIL recruits among in these two countries. ISIL also has the advantage of facing off against weak states hollowed out by corruption, penetrated by foreign powers (e.g., Russia, Iran), and in some cases, tolerant of ISIL presence because the threat of terrorism can be used to justify harsh treatment of broader opposition.

Figure 2. Iraqi Sunni Views of the State



SOURCE: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, “Lack of Responsiveness Impacts Mood August—September 2015 Survey Findings,” undated.

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ISIL also has the advantage of operating as an alternative to the Assad and former Maliki regimes. So while ISIL practices are abhorrent, in Syria, they are compared with a regime that uses chemical weapons and barrel bombs against its own population. In Iraq, ISIL finds traction among a population that controlled the instruments of the state before the U.S. overthrow of Saddam Hussein but is now subject to sectarian retribution. These conditions are ripe for ISIL insofar as the group can exploit existing grievances while the outrage of regime practices distracts from ISIL's own brutality.

ISIL Provinces

ISIL also has gathered a collection of local insurgent groups into its transregional network.¹⁴ Approximately 50 such groups have pledged their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and many of these groups have been accepted as "provinces" of the so-called Islamic State.¹⁵ Many of these provinces are clustered in areas already struggling with conflict, widespread grievances, and a weak central government. In Libya, ISIL found a haven in the central coastal city of Sirte. Not coincidentally, Sirte is home to the Qadhadhfa tribe, which was a key support base of former leader Muammar al-Qadhafi and lost out in his removal from power.¹⁶ In Egypt, an ISIL affiliate called Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis has found fertile ground in the Sinai, a neglected region that operates in the Lake Chad Basin of West Africa, and smaller ISIL-affiliated groups exist in South and Central Asia (see Table 2).

These groups receive several benefits from aligning with ISIL. By associating with the preeminent brand in the violent jihadi movement, they receive boosts in recruitment, help with propaganda generation and distribution, and potentially access to addi-

tional funds (although it is unclear how much financial support ISIL has provided to its provinces). On the other hand, affiliation with ISIL is not always a reflection of strength.¹⁷ When Boko Haram pledged its allegiance to Baghdadi in 2015, it was rapidly losing territory.¹⁸ In addition, the decision to align with ISIL can lead to splits within the ranks; when Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis pledged allegiance to ISIL, it led to a schism between the "Sinai State" and its Nile Valley network.¹⁹

Most of the political violence conducted by these aligned groups has been directed at local security forces, other government assets, and civilian targets; some of these groups control territory and govern as proto-states. But these groups also have attacked foreign targets, as in October 2015, when fighters from the Islamic State in the Sinai placed a bomb on a Russian charter airplane as it departed Egypt; the attack killed all 224 passengers.²⁰ Other groups had expanded their target set to include foreign interests before aligning with ISIL. For example, Boko Haram attacked a UN facility in Abuja in September 2011.

There are other differences among the provinces. Boko Haram is far and away the most lethal of the ISIL affiliates. In 2014, Boko Haram actually outpaced ISIL on the number of deaths attributed to its attacks.²¹ On the other end of the spectrum, ISIL Khorasan has had minimal impact on the conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan and has yet to carry out a spectacular attack. Another difference is in the level of coordination between these groups and ISIL's core leadership in Iraq and Syria. Public information on operational links is spotty, but many analysts are dubious that Boko Haram has much contact with ISIL core or has truly subordinated its organization to ISIL's command. The North African affiliates, on the other hand, are coordinating among themselves with Ansar Bayt

Table 2. ISIL Provinces

Branch	Main Areas of Operation	Estimated Number of Fighters	Examples of Attacks Claimed
The Libyan provinces—ISIL actually claims three—include fighters who previously belonged to Ansar al-Sharia. Many foreign fighters, particularly Tunisians, are also believed to make up its ranks.	Derna, Benghazi	1,000	Beheadings of Egyptian and Ethiopian Christians in February and April 2015; attack on Westerners in the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli in January 2015
The so-called Sinai State was established by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis as part of its allegiance to ISIL.	The Sinai, particularly Arish, Rafah, and Sheikh Zuwayd; sporadic attacks in Cairo, the Nile Delta, and Upper Egypt.	Up to 1,000	Downing of Russian airliner departing Sharm el-Sheikh in October 2015; assassination of Egyptian prosecutor general in June 2015
ISIL Khorasan is made up of former members of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban.	Southern Nangarhar Province in Afghanistan	About 1,000	Best known for turf battles with the Taliban
Boko Haram	Lake Chad Basin (includes parts of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad)	4,000–6,000	Massacre in Baga that may have killed up to 2,000 people in January 2015; abduction of nearly 300 Nigerian schoolgirls in April 2014

SOURCES: U.S. State Department Counterterrorism Bureau, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2015," June 2016; Congressional Research Service, "Nigeria's Boko Haram: Frequently Asked Questions," March 29, 2016; Missy Ryan, "U.S. Strikes Islamic State Stronghold in Libya for First Time," *Washington Post*, August 1, 2016; "U.S. Launches Airstrikes in Libya Targeting ISIS: Pentagon," *Military.com*, August 1, 2016.

al-Maqdis, using Libyan territory as a refuge; ISIL leadership may view Libya as a "fallback option" should its caliphate in the Euphrates River valley collapse.²²

ISIL Threat to West

ISIL leaders have taken advantage of its proto-state to engage in an extensive social media campaign aimed not only at local audiences inside Syria and Iraq but also at Muslims worldwide.²³ ISIL

makes extensive use of Twitter, Telegram, and Tumblr to communicate with a global audience.²⁴ As part of this campaign, ISIL has encouraged Muslims to travel to Syria and Iraq to either fight or help build the caliphate. If they cannot migrate to the Levant, ISIL instructs its followers to join groups that have established provinces. If that is impossible, ISIL urges sympathizers to conduct local attacks, especially in North America, Western Europe, and Australia.²⁵

Recent attacks in Europe and the United States reveal the different types of threats that ISIL poses. On November 13, 2015, Paris came under attack by ISIL-associated terrorists. One hundred and twenty-nine people died as a result of these attacks.²⁶ Further investigations revealed that the attack leader, Abdel Hamid Abaaoud, had traveled to Syria from Belgium to fight with ISIL against the Assad regime in early 2014. Abaaoud subsequently returned to Europe—primarily Greece and Belgium—and was linked by authorities to four of six terrorist plots disrupted in France between March and October 2015.²⁷

Less than a month later, on December 2, 2015, 14 people were killed in an attack in San Bernardino, California.²⁸ The San Bernardino attackers had not fought in Syria; they instead indicated sympathy with ISIL on social media. This appears to be the case in the shootings in Orlando, Florida, and in Nice, France, although caution is warranted given that individuals who appear to be lone wolves are sometimes later revealed to have deeper operational ties to ISIL than initially presumed.²⁹

The precise number of foreign fighters who have joined ISIL is not known, but estimates tend to fall between 30,000 and 40,000.³⁰ The breadth of fighters' origin countries is staggering; the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs has noted that foreign fighters have arrived from at least 145 countries. In terms of geographic distribution, a little more than half of ISIL's foreign fighters are believed to have originated from the Middle East and North Africa, with Europe and the former Soviet republics making up the bulk of the remainder.

What is less well known is how the evolution of ISIL's recruitment strategy and the counter-ISIL campaign are affecting the flow of foreign fighters over time. According to the Soufan Group, between June 2014 and December 2015, between 15,000 and

19,000 foreign fighters joined the ISIL—roughly 1,000 foreign fighters a month. U.S. officials believe that the number of foreign fighter arrivals has decreased in recent months, with the flow only a quarter of what it was at its peak.³¹ Some of these fighters have been killed on the battlefield, and some likely have no intention of returning to their countries of origin.

U.S. military strikes against financial institutions and oil facilities have placed a serious financial strain on ISIL leadership, with reports of cash shortages to pay recruits and the raising of taxes and fees on the population. In addition, a number of high-ranking financial officials have been killed.³²

The effect of ISIL's reduced territory and resources on the foreign fighter threat to the West is very unclear. The reported dramatic decline in the flow of foreign fighters has led to worries that would-be fighters might choose to attack at home, rather than abroad, and that battle-hardened veterans might seek out new places for conflict.³³

A Strategy to Disrupt ISIL's Transregional Network

As we have detailed, ISIL poses several different threats to U.S. interests. These include its destabilizing presence in Syria and Iraq as well as outside of the Levant, its ability to attract and direct foreign fighters, and its inspiration of "lone wolves." However, strategy design requires a more focused look at what can be achieved reasonably, given limited resources. Therefore, we have chosen to prioritize homeland security in our strategy and focused on efforts to mitigate the risk of ISIL external operations or ISIL-inspired attacks inside the United States, Western Europe, and Australia.

In prioritizing homeland security, we are not arguing that the ISIL threat outside Iraq and Syria is growing, even though some

experts argue that the reduction in the ISIL caliphate could lead to more attacks outside Iraq and Syria.³⁴ It is also true that the threat since 9/11 has been considerably less than many predicted, probably as the result of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) investigations and pressure overseas. In the future, we believe that homeland security deserves priority in terms of attention and resources, as the global threat of violent jihadism will remain.

Our strategy calls for sustained pressure against ISIL in multiple regions. Pressure against a transregional network, such as ISIL, can take many forms at the tactical level, but it should be guided by two principles. First, the strategy should reduce support for ISIL and al Qaeda among Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria. Second, the strategy should increase the difficulty of executing terrorist attacks against the United States and other Western countries. Of course, sometimes trade-offs exist between these two guiding principles. The following sections outline the components of such a strategy and attempt to set priorities when trade-offs arise.

Responding to Major ISIL Transregional Hubs in Iraq and Syria

Even though our strategy prioritizes protecting the U.S. homeland, ISIL's major network hubs are in Iraq and Syria, so we begin with our ideas for how to respond in these countries.

The U.S. strategy to defeat ISIL emphasizes efforts to diminish its control over people and territory in Syria and Iraq. The map of areas of control of ISIL and others in Iraq and Syria is constantly changing. Figure 3 offers a snapshot of Baghdad's increasing control; it has retaken Ramadi, Fallujah, and Tikrit, and the military campaign to liberate Mosul is well under way. Figure 3 also shows how Kurdish-controlled territory has expanded beyond the auton-

mous zone in Iraq. The map in Syria is especially dynamic, with recent Turkish military operations along its border cutting off ISIL's flow of supplies and foreign fighters.

While we agree that Syria and Iraq should remain central to any strategy against ISIL, we disagree somewhat with the U.S. approach. Namely, our proposed strategy adheres to the guiding principle of reducing the attraction of ISIL for Sunni Arab populations, even as military operations proceed. In Iraq, this means improving governance and reaching some reconciliation between the Shia-led central government and the country's Sunni Arab community. In Syria, this means reducing human suffering and promoting political change in a way that, likewise, makes it difficult for ISIL to take advantage of Sunni Arab grievances.³⁵

The strategic implication of our approach is that U.S.-supported forces would ensure that territory seized from ISIL is kept out of the hands of jihadist groups in the longer term. "Liberation," in this sense, needs also to lead to an improvement in the population's security and access to basic services. The U.S. government learned these lessons during Operation Iraqi Freedom, but U.S. forces are not in the lead in Syria or Iraq today, nor should they be. The problem is that local ground forces have, for the most part, not met such standards in operations in Ramadi and Falluja in Iraq and in Tal Abyad and Manbij in Syria.³⁶

Each of these cities should be treated as a test case in which the rule of law and improvement in living conditions encourages other communities under ISIL control to seek liberation. Heavy-handed control by Shia and Kurdish militias against civilians and a lack of government responsiveness to basic needs undermines the momentum of the military campaign and sets the conditions for future reversals.

Iraq

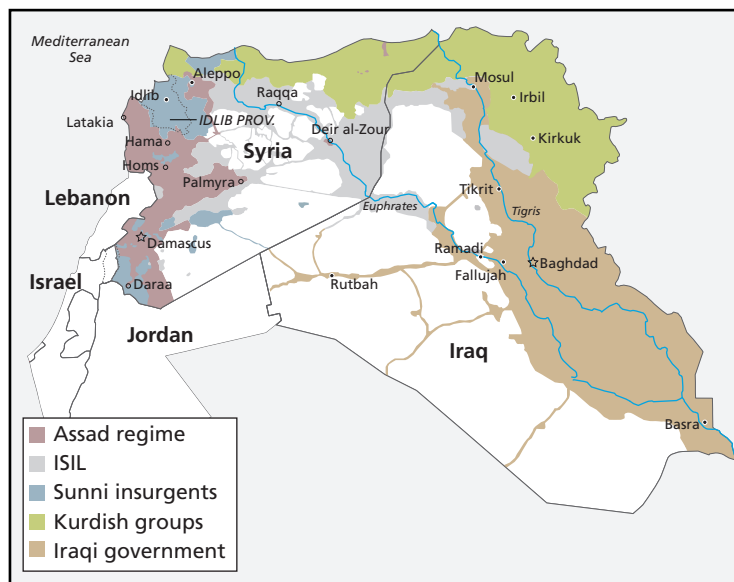
Press for Reconciliation

In our proposed strategy, the United States would calibrate support relative to the Iraqi central government's inclusivity and reconciliation with Sunni Arabs. Specifically, the United States should press for changes in Iraqi laws that would open a path to political accommodation with the country's Sunni Arabs. Among the reconciliation initiatives being considered—which include the general amnesty law, federal court law, and national guard act—polling suggests that Sunni Arabs care most about the general amnesty law.³⁷ Sunnis also say that “ensuring a fair judicial process” and “equitable sharing of resources among sects” are important to them. The United States should not prioritize other measures that Washington has previously championed—such as the national guard act or decentralization—but should respect what Iraqi Sunnis say are their priorities. In this case, that appears to be amnesty, judicial reform, and equitable distribution of resources.

The United States has rarely tried withholding support to achieve political goals in Iraq, but when it has (e.g., withholding assistance until Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki stepped down), it has had an impact. While Maliki's removal happened as a result of his losing the support of Iran, it happened. We recommend that the United States seek to use its limited leverage in this area to achieve these political goals.

While the United States has an interest in seeing reconciliation, it is not the right mediator to broker between the central government and Iraq's Sunni Arab community. Doing so would be too reminiscent of the 2003–2011 period and signal an expanded U.S. role that would generate popular opposition, something Muqtada

Figure 3. Map of Iraq and Syria



SOURCE: Karen DeYoung and Louisa Loveluck, “Fearing Abandonment by Trump, CIA-Backed Rebels in Syria Mull Alternatives,” *Washington Post*, December 3, 2016; Liz Sly and Karen DeYoung, “Violence Quickly Mars Deal in Syria,” *Washington Post*, September 13, 2016.

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al-Sadr is already trying to exploit. In addition, U.S. brokering would inevitably be read as championing one sect over another and thus sustain divisions within the country. It is possible that circumstances could arise where third-party mediation could promote reconciliation. Oman is one candidate for such a role, given its record as a regional bridge builder. Qatar and Kuwait also have experience mediating recent intra-Arab disputes.

In continuing to support the training of Iraqi security forces, the United States would make clear the need for initiatives from Baghdad to integrate Sunni Arabs into those forces.³⁸ The United

States would not take steps to train and equip Sunni groups (such as National Mobilization forces) separate from the ISF so as not to inhibit integration or fan Sunni hopes of a return to the pre-2003 status quo.³⁹ Supporting militias outside of a national framework is a tempting proposition to achieve short-term gains, but it is not a sound approach to sustaining the outcome. Since the jihadi threat is a long-term challenge, it is time for the United States to be more disciplined about limiting its tactics and training resources to those designed for durable results.

Curb Role of Iraqi Kurds

The United States should support the peshmerga's involvement in liberating Mosul and other Iraqi cities only insofar as the peshmerga operates in support of the Iraqi government and Sunni Arab forces. The peshmerga should not have the lead in liberating any areas except where Kurds are the majority community. Since Mosul is estimated to be roughly 60 percent Sunni Arab, it is critical that Sunni Arab forces are involved in both clearing and holding the city.⁴⁰

The United States needs also to address how to balance its counter-ISIL goals in the military campaign to liberate Mosul, given the possibility of violence between Shia and Kurds. Kurdish leaders have vowed to hold territory acquired in the counter-ISIL campaign.⁴¹ Baghdad and the Shia militias aligned with it are determined to prevent the Kurds from keeping this territory. The

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United States needs to gain firm commitments from the Kurds on the limits of their territorial ambitions, given the role of the peshmerga in the military campaign to liberate Mosul.

Iran's primary interest in Iraq is to consolidate its influence in Baghdad, and it sees the United States as the Iraqi government's alternative patron. While the United States and Iran share an interest in rolling back ISIL, cooperation between Washington and Tehran is limited by competition for influence in Iraq. The United States cannot expect that Iran will moderate Shia militia actions in the Iraqi military campaign to liberate Mosul, making it even more difficult to achieve the long-term goal of countering jihadi support among the country's Sunni Arabs.

Syria

The United States finds itself with very little influence in Syria both in creating a counter-ISIL coalition and in affecting the insurgency aimed at deposing the Assad regime.

No State Partner Against ISIL in Syria

Unlike Baghdad—which is a partner, if an imperfect one—the United States lacks a regional state that it can count on to lead the counter-ISIL campaign in Syria, and there are no prospects on the horizon.

Riyadh prioritizes Assad's departure ahead of defeating ISIL and also sees Syria, like Iraq, as an arena of strategic competition with Iran, supporting groups with a sectarian tinge (e.g., Jaysh-al-Islam). Doha's top priority is also the anti-Assad campaign, not so much out of a regional power competition with Tehran, but out of solidarity with Syria's Sunni community and a further preference for Islamist factions (Ahrar al-Sham) within it. While Iran views

ISIL as an enemy, it prioritizes bolstering the Assad regime, consolidating its influence in Syria, and keeping a supply line to Hezbollah. Russia has joined the conflict in Syria with a military force that primarily, but not exclusively, takes the form of an air campaign supporting the Assad regime.

Ankara's top priority is containing Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria, as it fears an autonomous area will provide sanctuary for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated U.S. foreign terrorist organization, and set a precedent of autonomy that could be sought by its own sizable Kurdish minority. Turkey's recent military operations into Syria with the Free Syrian Army against ISIL were nominally aimed to protect the Turkish border from ISIL, but in fact were primarily directed at preventing the YPG from seizing that territory. Closing off the border to ISIL and foreign fighter flows is an important step, but future Turkish involvement in Syria against ISIL is uncertain and will always be defined by its implications in the conflict with the Kurds.

This leaves the United States with the YPG and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is YPG-led and only partially Arab, as its primary partners in the military campaign to clear Raqqa of ISIL fighters.⁴² To reduce ISIL's appeal, and not just its territorial control, the United States needs to make clear that a Kurdish-led force is not the appropriate vehicle for holding Raqqa, if the military campaign succeeds. Given the connections between the PKK and the YPG, the United States should not provide military assistance directly to the YPG.

The United States needs to continue to push for integration of Arabs into the SDF, while recognizing that the SDF is still viewed by Syrian Arabs as a Kurdish force. The recent campaign in Manbij provides a test case for future operations against Raqqa. The Kurd-

ish Democratic Union Party's efforts to dominate the notables council established for post-liberation governance, as well as a perception by Arab residents that the Kurdish Democratic Union Party shows favoritism to Kurds in the provision of security and public services, should be a warning against replicating this experience in Raqqa.

In partnering with the Kurds as a local ground force in Syria, the United States now confronts the serious risk that Kurdish territorial gains will lead to direct conflict with Turkey and potentially others. The most sensitive area is the swath of territory west of the Euphrates and east of the so-called Marea line. The liberation of Manbij in this territory was a positive development for the counter-ISIL campaign but contributed to the Turkish military intervention, given how the YPG is using the cover of the counter-ISIL campaign to unite the cantons of Kobane and Afrin, a Turkish redline. The YPG's need to protect its gains in Manbij from the Turks has also had the effect of distracting them from the military campaign against ISIL in Raqqa, which again shows that the U.S. priority of defeating ISIL in Syria is not shared by others.

Asking both the YPG and Turkish-supported groups to stand down is a start, but the United States needs to do more and hold the Syrian Kurds to earlier commitments to focus on Raqqa, rather than seeking to control northern Syria. If the YPG persists, the United States should consider withholding air support, as well as training and equipment—despite the challenge that would introduce to the counter-ISIL campaign.⁴³

Keep Low Profile in Syria's Civil War

With the fall of Aleppo to the regime, Assad forces are in the midst of a brutal conquest of the western spine of the country and

are supported in this endeavor by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. The diplomatic/military paths being pursued are all unlikely to resolve the conflicts, including the most-recent talks convened by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, which consciously excluded the United States and other Western powers.⁴⁴ The Assad regime is consolidating gains, but only with the support of outside powers. Prospects of a negotiated political settlement are dim, primarily because of Assad's intransigence. Military options to compel the Assad government to negotiate seriously essentially disappeared when Russia came to its defense. No opposing group is able to function beyond some limited amount of territory, and each has enemies seeking its destruction. Continuing to support and arm moderate groups fighting Assad is becoming less viable with their military losses. Efforts to make Russia responsible for moderating Assad's behavior in terms of barrel bombing and starvation of rebel-held areas concedes acceptance of the survival of the Assad regime and have failed, notwithstanding the U.S. proposal to ground the Syrian Air Force in designated areas and facilitate coordination between the United States and Russia in striking Jabhat an-Nusra and ISIL.⁴⁵

This leaves the United States with no alternative but to pursue diplomacy and tactical steps to establish a ceasefire, reduce humanitarian suffering, and promote change in a way that makes it difficult for ISIL to take advantage of Sunni Arab grievances.⁴⁶ Until the situation changes, the United States should keep its expectations low, as well as its profile.

Making Homeland Security the Priority

Given the very real limitations of U.S. influence inside Syria and Iraq, the United States cannot rely primarily on success in these countries to mitigate the risk of external operations or inspired

attacks. The strategy must also include substantial efforts to reduce ISIL and al Qaeda's appeal beyond populations in Syria and Iraq, especially those in North America and Western Europe. In this context, any strategy to reduce the appeal of ISIL and al Qaeda must address ISIL's ability to inspire sympathizers to act independently.

The United States has been working with local partners, such as the United Arab Emirates and Malaysia, to expand efforts to counter ISIL messaging outside the United States. Within the United States, it also has begun an initiative to partner with local civil society groups to counter violent extremism. The United Nations and European Union also have developed programs to disseminate lessons learned in counter-radicalization efforts. But history has demonstrated that counter-radicalization is very much a localized process and can be difficult to implement, especially among marginalized populations, such as those in some parts of Western Europe. Moreover, the United States is hampered somewhat in its efforts to help civil society groups at home and abroad by legal restrictions on advocating for or against religious tenets. Thus, while our proposed strategy does include countering violent extremism as a component, it focuses on the risk posed by foreign fighters and their roles in external operations, as well as ISIL-inspired attacks.⁴⁷

Specifically, the United States should prioritize efforts to minimize ISIL's ability to recruit foreign fighters from the West or other visa waiver countries.⁴⁸ Much has been done in this area. The United Nations has worked with its member countries to adjust their legal frameworks to make both foreign fighter recruitment and traveling overseas to fight illegal. The U.S. government should build upon these efforts and expand technical assistance to relevant countries so they are able to gather advance passenger information

not only on outbound travel but also on returnees.⁴⁹ In addition, the United Nations should be encouraged to emphasize the challenges posed by recidivism, identify lessons learned, and help member states put programs in place now—before they experience an unmanageable surge of returnees.

Indeed, the primary gap is in the treatment of returnees. Returnees represent potential operatives, facilitators, *and* recruiters. But countries have different ways of dealing with this threat: Some imprison returnees, some put returnees through deradicalization programs, and others revoke their citizenship. This haphazard approach to foreign fighter returnees presents the possibility that ISIL will be able to use foreign fighter returnees to rebuild its facilitation networks. The United Nations should, therefore, lead an effort to standardize or at least unify the international communities' approach to foreign fighter returnees. As a corollary, the United States should also assist other countries, including countries such as Kosovo, Tunisia, and Indonesia, as they attempt to reabsorb foreign fighter returnees. Such support would likely differ by country, but it could include encouraging countries to strengthen legal frameworks that allow for the reintegration of reformed fighters, share intelligence, or commit resources to programs that counter violent extremism.

Increasing Operational Hurdles for Terrorists

Eroding the appeal of ISIL to Sunni Arabs globally is clearly a long-term effort. Therefore, the U.S. government must also create policies that increase the difficulty of external terrorist operations and inspired attacks. The FBI and other law enforcement agencies have been very aggressive over the past two years in attempting to disrupt inspired plots within the United States, and such actions need to continue. The FBI has come under criticism for its use of

informants to disrupt these plots, as well as its desire for commercial companies to create “back doors” for their encrypted software and handheld devices. We acknowledge that strict adherence to civil rights and civil liberties are required. Nonetheless, a successful strategy of “protecting the homeland” needs to include sufficient resources devoted to identifying, investigating, and disrupting ISIL plots within the United States. Other essential security measures, such as airport security, are needed to minimize the number of casualties from attacks.

At the same time, the U.S. government cannot rely solely on domestic security measures to protect the homeland. These measures should be coupled with counterterrorism pressure against ISIL overseas. The first operational hurdle is to **make it difficult for ISIL to recruit operatives**. We already addressed this somewhat in the contexts of eroding the appeal of ISIL and al Qaeda and of FBI investigations, but another option also exists. The U.S. military has indicated that it would like to use digital weapons to reduce ISIL's ability to reach global audiences.⁵⁰ If ISIL ideologues struggle to reach audiences, then the actual appeal of their messages to populations within North America, Western Europe, or Australia, matters less.

The United States needs to improve its countermessaging against ISIL and al Qaeda, and potentially for use against other transregional networks. Multiple departments and agencies currently

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play a role in what is called strategic communications, information operations, or counter messaging. But significant opportunities exist. For example, defectors from ISIL have begun to speak out. Refugees also have told their stories of horrible treatment and losses, which undermine ISIL's claim to be a legitimate caliphate. And, just as social media platforms assist ISIL and al Qaeda, they also can be used to gauge the nature and the extent to which ISIL and al Qaeda messages resonate with local populations around the world. But the United States will need to put in place appropriate authorities, structures, resourcing, and plans to take advantage of these opportunities.

The second operational hurdle is to **make it difficult for ISIL to transfer resources**, including operatives, funds, and weapons, to combat zones. One way to do this is to focus on surveillance and interdiction in transit hubs that are commonly used by ISIL logisticians as way points to reach the physical caliphate. Inevitably, some foreign fighter recruits from the West and other visa waiver countries will make it to Syria, Iraq, or other ISIL provinces. The U.S. government should work to minimize the ability of ISIL to send these operatives, along with accompanying resources, back home to conduct attacks.

The United States has emphasized countering terrorist financing for the past decade, but gaps remain in the broader effort to disrupt ISIL logistics. Specifically, the United Nations has identified “broken travel”—operatives taking multiple, indirect routes between countries—within Europe as a challenge. The United States should prioritize efforts to overcome these challenges to diminish ISIL's ability to conduct attacks in the West. Further, as a corollary, special attention should be given to finding ways to reduce ISIL's ability to transfer funds *and* weapons among the conflict zones in Syria/Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan.

The third operational hurdle is to **make it difficult for ISIL to train operatives for external operations**, such as the November 2015 attacks in Paris. History suggests that some foreign fighters will likely still make it to Syria and Iraq, then return home with the intention of conducting attacks. Thus, for the third hurdle, the United States should try to ensure that these operatives do not have the capability to conduct sophisticated attacks. The most realistic way to accomplish this objective is to prioritize attacking training camps in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and other countries that harbor foreign fighters. Of course, some of these camps are makeshift and difficult to find. Foreign fighters do not always train in camps, nor are they always highly capable themselves. The best example is Umar Farouk Abdullamutallab, who boarded Northwest Airlines Flight 253 from Amsterdam to Detroit in December 2009, intending to detonate a suicide belt. Authorities eventually discovered that the sophisticated bomb had been developed by Ibrahim al-Asiri, a member of al Qaeda's branch in Yemen. Attacks on training camps, nevertheless, represent a third hurdle for ISIL as it attempts to attack the West.

An added benefit of attacks against training camps is that they can minimize ISIL's ability to create alternative safe havens outside Syria and Iraq. That said, these attacks also have drawbacks: They undermine the sovereignty of allies or partners and, in some instances, generate animosity among Sunni Muslim populations worldwide. Direct attacks by the U.S. military should, therefore, be conducted judiciously. An approach that the United States is using is to work through local partners, either nation-states or irregular forces, to conduct these attacks. For example, the United States was a strong advocate for the unity government in Libya that succeeded in attracting Misratan militias to liberate Sirte from ISIL control.

But when necessary, the United States has also taken direct action, such as its air strike against an Islamic State camp in Sabratha.

The fourth operational hurdle is to **make it difficult for ISIL to plan for and execute sophisticated attacks**. Ultimately, it is possible that ISIL will be able to recruit foreign fighters, gather sufficient resources, provide the fighters with appropriate capabilities, and send them home to conduct attacks. So the United States should also prioritize efforts to ensure that they cannot plan for or execute sophisticated attacks. Multiple avenues exist to accomplish this objective; most fall under the more traditional category of “counterterrorism.” They include the use of human and signals intelligence to identify plans by foreign terrorist groups to attack the United States. They also include efforts to capture foreign terrorist leaders, planners, and skilled bombmakers. These types of activities essentially make terrorists “run and hide,” so that they cannot exert sufficient resources to planning or executing sophisticated attacks.

Policy Shifts Needed to Disrupt ISIL’s Transregional Network

To implement our proposed strategy of disrupting ISIL’s transregional network, some changes in current policies will be needed.

Resources for the counter-ISIL strategy today are allocated within the individual budgets of the national security and domestic agencies, which leads to funding emerging without an overall set of priorities for the counter-ISIL strategy. Our strategy calls for prioritizing homeland security with more government coordination and resources being allocated to the goal of disrupting the transregional transit hubs used by terrorists to move people, money, and weapons.

Better coordination of domestic and overseas U.S. government activities and resources is needed to implement our proposed

strategy of focusing on ISIL as a transregional network overseas. While there have been major improvements since 9/11, too many stovepipes still exist—among embassy regional and counterterrorism experts (U.S. Agency for International Development officers, Central Intelligence Agency station chiefs, FBI legal attachés, and SOF elements) as well as among law enforcement entities (the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Agency, Customs and Border Protection, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement).

Outside the United States, U.S. embassy-led country teams remain the primary instruments of foreign policy. These country teams include representatives from U.S. diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement, and military communities. This model has a major shortcoming when it comes to a transregional counter-ISIL strategy (and counterterrorism strategy in general): Country-specific strategies only deal with national manifestations of transregional threats. The need, then, is to knit together an overarching strategy that can be easily translated and implemented at a national and local level. One possible way to facilitate such a strategy would be to regularize coordinating calls among relevant country teams (ambassadors). These coordinating calls should be facilitated by regional bureaus in the State Department, as well as the regional offices in the Office of Secretary of Defense and relevant Joint Staff planners. The combatant commands would participate as necessary.

Special attention should be given to interdicting the transit hubs used by ISIL logisticians to transfer operatives, funds, and weapons to and from the combat zones.

Beyond coordination, the United States needs to expand the access and placement of assets from the intelligence community, law enforcement, and SOF. The intelligence community needs increased investment in low-intensity-warfare human intelligence collection, as well as a greater emphasis on partnering with irregular forces, investing in vetting these forces, and coordinating with SOF. The presence of FBI legal attaches needs to be expanded in countries both with and without SOF presence. These assets should be fully resourced and have access to Sensitive Compartmented Information Facilities. There should be expanded placement and access overseas for the full range of SOF forces, not just in task forces, but in the Special Operation Command (Forward) in Yemen and Pakistan. There is also a need to modify the logistics infrastructure (mostly in the Air Force) to provide such forward SOF forces with defensive close air support, emergency evacuation, etc.

Finally, the air campaign against ISIL in Syria and Iraq should emphasize attention and resources on destroying the ISIL leadership and training camps in Iraq and Syria, as well as ISIL's command and control and logistics flows of weapons and foreign fighters.⁵¹ This targeting would be deliberate and prosecuted as a sustained campaign. In military operations, very tight constraints would be kept on civilian casualties, to avoid backlash and giving ISIL an advantage in social media and recruitment. The United States also needs to be highly discerning in the use of close air support, given the dubious character of U.S. "partners" on the ground.

Critical Elements of Future U.S. Counter-ISIL Strategy

The debate over counter-ISIL strategies has tended to focus on rather stark alternatives that are based on different ways to employ

U.S. military forces: disengagement, containment, and aggressive rollback using combat forces. Our strategy seeks to broaden the focus to policies beyond the military dimension.

The U.S. strategy in countering ISIL needs to recognize the long-term nature of the global violent jihadi threat and make its central focus reducing the appeal of ISIL and other such groups (al Qaeda, Jabhat an-Nusra, and any future groups) in Iraq and Syria through both diplomatic and military efforts. This goal should be used to set expectations and measure success, even if it is less headline-grabbing and more difficult to achieve than changes in the map of ISIL-controlled territory.

The threat from violent jihadi groups is global, and so a successful strategy needs to focus on ISIL's transregional network. Protecting the U.S. homeland deserves priority, even if the threat has so far been less than predicted and relatively limited. While the counter-ISIL coalition may erode ISIL's control of major population centers in Iraq and Syria, other aspects of the threat will endure, including terrorist attacks on the West, and these will require a concerted campaign of intelligence, law enforcement, and military disruption.

Even though U.S. leverage is limited to affect the political situations in Iraq and Syria, the United States should focus on removing the underlying conditions—the lack of security, justice, and political representation—sustaining ISIL and other militant groups. In addition, the United States needs to re-evaluate how to balance the aims of the counter-ISIL campaign with the territorial and political ambitions of the Kurds, given the risk of violence between Shia and Kurds in Iraq and Turkey and the YPG in Syria. In the absence of commitments on the part of the Kurds to limit their territorial ambitions, and to avoid fueling conflict across the

region, the United States should be cautious in the ways it supports the YPG and peshmerga in its counter-ISIL military campaign.

Keeping expectations realistic is essential in carrying out a counter-ISIL strategy, for the U.S. interest in achieving regional stability in the Middle East and elsewhere confronts not only the

long-term jihadi threat but also the political and economic fragility of many of the states involved. In addition, the U.S. priority in defeating ISIL is not shared by other states in the region, and the interests of the Russians and the Iranians will sharply diverge with those of the United States.

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Notes

¹ The Obama administration's use of territory as a measure of its success in the counter-ISIL campaign can be seen in the Department of Defense's mapping of how ISIL's areas of influence were reduced from August 2014 to April 2016 (see Department of Defense, "Iraq and Syria: ISIL's Areas of Influence, August 2014 Through April 2016," web page, undated. As of January 16, 2017: http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/2014/0814_iraq/docs/20160512_ISIL%20Areas%20of%20Influence_Aug%202014%20through%20Apr%202016%20Map.pdf). Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Francis Dunford Jr. suggested that the appropriate metrics for measuring success were the erosion of ISIL territory, the constraining of ISIL resources, and the flow of foreign fighters (Jim Garamone, "Dunford Lists Ways to Measure Counter-ISIL Success," Joint Chiefs of Staff, web site, undated. As of January 16, 2017: <http://www.jcs.mil/Media/News/News-Display/Article/857786/dunford-lists-ways-to-measure-counter-isil-success>).

² At this point, ISI adopted the name of al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham, which is rendered in English as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or *Daesh* (an Arabic acronym).

³ Taking a regional state adversary as a point of comparison, Iran has roughly half a million men in its active military forces, ballistic missiles, and growing air defense capabilities (see International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, 2016, pp. 327–331). Taking an insurgent group as a point of comparison, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction reported that "(8.8 percent) [of districts] within 15 provinces were under insurgent control or influence, and 104 districts (25.6 percent) were 'at risk'" (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Quarterly Report to Congress," July 30, 2016, p. 86).

⁴ The estimate cited in this report comes from CIA Director John Brennan's testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee (Brennan, testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Washington, D.C., June 16, 2016). A week earlier, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest and Special Presidential Envoy Brett McGurk put the figure of foreign fighters at 19,000–25,000 (Earnest and McGurk, press briefing at the White House, Washington, D.C., June 9, 2016. As of January 16, 2017: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/10/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-and-special-presidential>).

⁵ Department of Defense, undated.

⁶ Keith Crane, "The Role of Oil in ISIL's Finances," testimony before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Washington, D.C., December 10, 2015.

⁷ Lina Khatib, "The Islamic State's Strategy: Lasting and Expanding," Carnegie Middle East Center, June 29, 2015. As of January 16, 2017: <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/06/29/islamic-state-s-strategy-lasting-and-expanding-pub-60511>; Christopher Blanchard and Carla Humud, *The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service, June 27, 2016.

⁸ "The replacement of Allah's law in some area of the world with the laws of men or causing that—by supporting those who fight against the Islamic State ruling by the Shari'ah—is kufr that expels its perpetrator from the religion and this ruling is from that in which no Muslim should have any doubt." "The Laws of Allah or the Laws of Men," *Dabiq* [ISIL's online magazine], No. 10, 2015, pp. 53–54.

⁹ "The tyrant rulers who rule your lands in the two holy places [i.e. Saudi Arabia], Yemen, the Levant, Iraq, Egypt, the Maghreb, Khorasan, the Caucasus, India, and Africa . . . they are allies of the Jews and Crusaders. Indeed, they are their slaves and servants. They are no more than watch dogs." Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, audio message, al-Battar Media Foundation, May 2015.

¹⁰ Sunni Muslims are estimated to represent 85–90 percent of the Muslim world.

¹¹ Jacob Poushter, "In Nations with Significant Muslim Populations, Much Disdain for ISIS," *FactTank*, Pew Research Center, November 17, 2015.

¹² Michael Knights, "ISIL 3-24: Do They Do Counter-Insurgency?" Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 30, 2014.

¹³ As ISIL leadership argues, "Sunnis, know that you are the only ones targeted, what is this war if not against you and against your religion? When you return to your religion and your jihad, then you will recover your glory, might, rights and sovereignty." Baghdadi, 2015.

¹⁴ Liam Stack, "How ISI[L] Expanded Its Threat," *New York Times*, November 14, 2015. As of January 16, 2017: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/11/14/world/middleeast/isis-expansion.html>

¹⁵ Some fighters from al-Qaeda affiliates have defected to ISIL. See Greg Miller, "Fighters Abandoning al-Qaeda to Join the Islamic State, US Officials Say," *Washington Post*, August 9, 2014. As of January 20, 2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/fighters-abandoning-al-qaeda-affiliates-to-join-islamic-state-us-officials-say/2014/08/09/c5321d10-1f08-11e4-ae54-0cfe1f974f8a_story.html

¹⁶ In this respect, the situation is similar to Iraq, where the insurgency is particularly strong in Saddam Hussein's old power base of Salah ad-Din Governorate.

¹⁷ Daniel Milton and Muhammad al-Ubaydi, "Pledging Bay'a: A Benefit or Burden to the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 8, No. 3, March 2015.

¹⁸ Alex Thurston, *“The Disease is Unbelief”: Boko Haram’s Religious and Political Worldview*, Brookings Institution, Analysis Paper No. 22, January 2016.

¹⁹ Mokhtar Awad and Samuel Tadros, “Bay’a Remorse? Wilayat Sinai and the Nile Valley,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 8, No. 8, August 21, 2015.

²⁰ Andrew Roth, “Russia Confirms Sinai Plane Crash Was the Work of Terrorists,” *Washington Post*, November 17, 2015. As of January 17, 2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russia-confirms-sinai-crash-was-the-work-of-terrorists/2015/11/17/496286f4-8d05-11e5-ae1f-af46b7df8483_story.html

²¹ The Global Terrorism Index estimates that Boko Haram attacks killed 6,644 in 2014, as compared with ISIL attacks, which killed 6,073. Of the 50 deadliest terrorist attacks of 2014, 27 are believed to have been perpetrated by Boko Haram. See Institute for Economics and Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2015,” November 2015.

²² David Kirkpatrick, Ben Hubbard, and Eric Schmitt, “ISIS’ Grip on Libyan City Gives It a Fallback Option,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2015.

²³ See, for example, Charlie Winter, “The Virtual ‘Caliphate’: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy,” Quilliam Foundation, July 2015. As of January 17, 2017: <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy.pdf>, and Aaron Zelin, “New Video Message from the Islamic State: ‘Victory from God and an Imminent Conquest—Wilayat al-Khayr,’” *Jihadology*, May 11, 2015. As of January 17, 2017: <http://jihadology.net/2015/05/11/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-victory-from-god-and-an-imminent-conquest-wilayat-al-khayr/>

²⁴ John O. Brennan, statement as prepared for delivery before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, June 16, 2016.

²⁵ Rukmini Callimachi, “How ISIS Built the Machinery of Terror Under Europe’s Gaze,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2016. As of January 17, 2017: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/29/world/europe/isis-attacks-paris-brussels.html>; Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, “This is the Promise of Allah,” statement released by al-Hayat Media Center, June 30, 2014; “Chechen IS Fighter Calls for Lone Wolf Attacks in US, Europe,” SITE Intelligence Group, December 17, 2014. As of January 17, 2017: <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/chechen-is-fighter-calls-in-video-for-lone-wolf-attacks-in-america-europe.html>

²⁶ Andrew Higgins and Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, “Paris Attack Suspect Killed in Shootout Had Plotted Terror for 11 Months,” *New York Times*,

November 19, 2015. As of January 17, 2017: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/20/world/europe/paris-attacks.html?ref=liveblog&r=0>

²⁷ Higgins and Freytas-Tamura, 2015.

²⁸ Missy Ryan, Adam Goldman, and Abby Phillip, “San Bernardino Shooters Had Been Radicalized ‘for Some Time,’ FBI Says,” *Washington Post*, December 7, 2015. As of January 17, 2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/san-bernardino-shooters-had-been-radicalized-for-some-time-fbi-says/2015/12/07/d88f8cd6-9d2d-11e5-a3c5-c77f2cc5a43c_story.html?hpid=hp_rhp-top-table-main_sanbernardino-315pm%3Ahomepage%2Fstory

²⁹ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, “The Myth of Lone-Wolf Terrorism: The Attacks in Europe and Digital Extremism,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 26, 2016. As of January 17, 2017: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/western-europe/2016-07-26/myth-lone-wolf-terrorism>

³⁰ Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, December 2015; James Clapper, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, statement for the record, report prepared for the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 9, 2016.

³¹ Top defense officials have declined to provide a precise number of current flows but have noted they are declining. See Ashton Carter and Joseph Dunford, “U.S. Strategy Against ISIS,” testimony before the Senate Arms Services Committee, April 28, 2016. Lower-ranking officials have estimated the current number as in the low hundreds per month. “U.S. Military Softens Claims on Drop in Islamic State’s Foreign Fighters,” Reuters, April 28, 2016. As of January 17, 2017: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-recruiting-idUSKCN0XP33K>

³² Joby Warrick and Liz Sly, “U.S.-Led Strikes Putting a Financial Squeeze on the Islamic State,” *Washington Post*, April 2, 2016. As of January 17, 2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-led-strikes-putting-a-financial-squeeze-on-the-islamic-state/2016/04/02/e739a7be-f848-11e5-a3ce-f06b5ba21f33_story.html

³³ Griff Witte, Sudarsan Raghavan, and James McAuley, “Flow of Foreign Fighters Plummets as Islamic State Loses Its Edge,” *Washington Post*, September 9, 2016. As of January 17, 2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/flow-of-foreign-fighters-plummets-as-isis-loses-its-edge/2016/09/09/ed3e0dda-751b-11e6-9781-49e591781754_story.html

³⁴ Witte, Raghavan, and McAuley, 2016.

³⁵ In its counter-ISIL strategy, the Obama administration did include the aim of “setting the conditions for a political solution to the civil war in Syria and to work towards inclusive governance in Iraq as the only durable means to prevent a future

terrorist organization like ISIL from re-emerging in the region,” but then focused on destroying ISIL in Iraq and Syria and its expansion globally, with a few lines about supporting political reforms in Iraq and the peace process in Syria. For the Obama administration’s counter-ISIL strategy, see Office of the White House, “Section 1222 Report: Strategy for the Middle East and to Counter Violent Extremism,” March 2016. As of January 17, 2017: https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/wysiwyg_uploaded/Section%201222%20Report.pdf

³⁶ For a description of reports of abuses in Falluja on the part of the Shia militias, see Ned Parker and Jonathan Landay, “Special Report: Massacre Reports Show U.S. Inability to Curb Iraq Militias,” Reuters, August 23, 2016. As of January 17, 2017: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-massacres-falluja-special-report-idUSKCN10Y1VD>

³⁷ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, “Lack of Responsiveness Impacts Mood August–September 2015 Survey Findings,” National Democratic Institute, 2015. As of January 17, 2017: https://www.ndi.org/files/August%202015%20Survey_NDI%20Website.pdf

³⁸ As of August 2016, the United States had trained more than 13,500 members of the Iraqi security forces, including more than 4,000 Iraqi Army soldiers, 1,500 counterterrorism service soldiers, 6,000 peshmerga, almost 1,000 federal police, and 300 border guards. See Sean MacFarland, Department of Defense press briefing, August 10, 2016.

³⁹ Not to be confused with *al-hashd al-sha’bi*, or the popular mobilization forces that are the better-known Shia militia groups.

⁴⁰ This is consistent with what the commander of U.S. Central Command has stated—the operation would not proceed until there are plans to stabilize the city, provide political leadership, and deal with humanitarian issues. Damian Paletta, “Pentagon Allies Jailed in Turkey Amid Coup Backlash, General Says,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 28, 2016. As of January 16, 2017: http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/07/28/pentagon-allies-jailed-in-turkey-amid-coup-backlash-general-says/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Mil%20EBB%207.29.16&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Military%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief&cb=logged0.7979132289320245

⁴¹ According to Falah Mustafa, head of the Iraqi Kurdish region’s foreign relations department, “all areas that have been liberated by the peshmerga forces, our (Kurdish) forces will stay there.” The Kurdish forces are estimated to have taken territory equivalent to around 50 percent of the size of their recognized autonomous zone. Susannah George and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, “Mosul Fight Is Already Redrawing the Map of Northern Iraq,” Associated Press, August 27, 2016. As of January 17, 2017: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/5271b7f7d7c244e5a9be57>

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⁴² Andrea Taylor and Aaron Stein, “Revisiting Train-and-Equip in Syria to Clear the Manbij Pocket,” War on the Rocks, blog, May 30, 2016. As of January 16, 2017: <http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/revisiting-train-and-equip-in-syria-to-clear-the-manbij-pocket>

⁴³ Former Vice President Joseph Biden noted, “We have made it absolutely clear to the elements that were part of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the YPG that participated [in the operation against Manbij], that they must move back across the [Euphrates] river. They cannot, will not, and under no circumstances get American support if they do not keep that commitment, period.” Joseph Biden and Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, press conference remarks, Ankara, Turkey, August 24, 2016.

⁴⁴ For a practical way to end the fighting in Syria that would focus on securing an immediate ceasefire, accompanied by an international agreed arrangement for its enforcement, see James Dobbins, Philip Gordon, and Jeffrey Martini, *A Peace Plan for Syria*, Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, PE-182-RC, 2015. As of January 16, 2017: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE182.html> As a sequel, these authors describe how decentralization of governance could be contribute to the goal of an inclusive, unified, and democratic Syria, in Dobbins, Gordon, and Martini, *A Peace Plan for Syria II: Options for Future Governance*, Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, PE-202-RC, 2016. As of January 16, 2017: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE202.html>

⁴⁵ Jabhat an-Nusra recently changed its name to Jabhat Fatah-al-Sham, claiming to have severed its ties with al Qaeda. The *Washington Post* released the terms of reference of a proposal for a U.S.-Russian Joint Implementation Group to coordinate procedures for targeting Jabhat an-Nusra and ISIL in Syria, deconflict their air strikes, and exchange information on the grounding of Syrian aircraft in designated areas. “Terms of Reference for the Joint Implementation Group,” posted on *Washington Post*, July 13, 2016. As of January 17, 2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2016/07/13/Editorial-Opinion/Graphics/terms_of_reference_for_the_Joint_Implementation_Group.pdf

⁴⁶ At the time of writing, UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura was still seeking resumption in peace talks, but most analysts doubted that was possible, as fighting had escalated in Aleppo.

⁴⁷ For the Obama administration’s joint countering violent extremism strategy, see White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Fact Sheet: The White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism,” February 18, 2015. As of

January 16, 2017: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/18/fact-sheet-white-house-summit-counter-terror-extremism>

⁴⁸ There is no definitive open-source estimate of the number of foreign fighters that fit this category, given that it is not known which national contingents are among the surviving foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Now-dated estimates put the figure of Western foreign fighters at 2,000–3,000. Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, “Be Afraid, Be a Little Afraid,” Brookings Institution, November 2014.

⁴⁹ “Action Against Threat of Foreign Terrorist Fighters Must Be Ramped Up, Security Council Urges in High-Level Meeting,” United Nations Security Council Press Release No. 11912, May 29, 2015. As of January 17, 2017: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11912.doc.htm>

⁵⁰ Spencer Ackerman, “Pentagon Admits It Is ‘Looking to Accelerate’ Cyber-Attacks Against ISIS,” *The Guardian*, February 29, 2016. As of January 17, 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/29/pentagon-admits-cyber-attacks-against-isis>

⁵¹ Around 90 percent of U.S. bombs are dropped on ISIL fighters and other battlefield targets. For a description of the U.S. air campaign, see Eric Schmidt, “U.S. Says Its Strikes are Hitting More Significant ISIS Targets,” *New York Times*, May 25, 2016. As of January 17, 2017: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/26/us/politics/us-strikes-isis-targets.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share&_r=0

About This Perspective

This Perspective offers a strategy to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as a transregional threat, with a focus on steps to confront the violent jihadist threat over the long term. The strategy prioritizes the security of the U.S. homeland, then focuses on two issues: (1) reducing support for ISIL and al Qaeda among Sunni Arabs and (2) balancing support for Kurds in the counter-ISIL campaign with avoidance of fueling ethnic conflict.

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About the Authors

Lynn E. Davis is a Senior Fellow at RAND and former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs. Her most-recent publications include the series *The Days After a Deal with Iran* and *Clarifying the Rules for Targeted Killing*.

Jeffrey Martini is a senior researcher at RAND, focused on Middle East politics and security. He has written on Islamist movements, civil conflict, and regional balance of power issues. His most-recent publications include *A Peace Plan for Syria* and *A Peace Plan for Syria II: Options for Future Governance*.

Kim Cragin is the senior research fellow for counterterrorism at the National Defense University. She was previously a political scientist at the RAND Corporation. Her most-recent publications include "Old Becomes New: Kidnappings by Daesh and other Salafi-Jihadists" in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* and *What Causes Individuals to Reject Extremism?*

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